

Mill on Moral Rules and the Art of Life

Many recent commentators have argued that John Stuart Mill's account of moral obligation is best understood as some form of rule-utilitarianism. Nonetheless, others continue to insist that, at least at times, he uses act-utilitarian reasoning. These critics cite three major grounds in support of their interpretation: (1) Mill says that when rules come into conflict, we must make a direct appeal to utility to determine the morally correct action; (2) Mill seems to say that we may make an exception to any moral principle if the consequences of following that rule would be catastrophic, and (3) in some passages, Mill justifies the use of secondary principles only as rules of thumb, that is, as practical guides for accurately determining the utility-maximizing act in particular situations.

In response, I argue that the first two considerations can be given rule-utilitarian interpretations. Mill, I contend, does not treat apparent exceptions to rules (or resolution of potential conflicts between rules) on a case-by-case basis, but, rather, in terms of general rule-like amendments or delimitations of the scope of the rules. Granting the critics' third point, I show that none of the problematic passages refer to clear instances of moral obligations; rather they reflect other non-moral aspects of the utility-maximizing "Art of Life" that Mill develops in the *System of Logic*.

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